ICC rejects BD demand to play T20 World Cup matches outside India

NEW DELHI: The International Cricket Council on Wednesday rejected Bangladesh's demand to shift their matches at next month's Twenty20 World Cup outside India, casting doubt on their participation in next month's tournament.

The T20 World Cup begins in a little over two weeks on February 7, with Bangladesh's four group matches scheduled to be played in Kolkata and Mumbai, and uncertainty loomed over the global showpiece after they refused to tour India and demanded to play their matches in Sri Lanka, which is co-hosting the tournament.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board has repeatedly refused to play its games in India, and the Dhaka government said on Tuesday that they would not be pressured into changing their stance.

The stalemate prompted an emergency ICC board meeting in which the governing body decided against tinkering with the tournament schedule and dismissed any security threat to the team following political tensions between the South Asian neighbours.

"The decision was taken after considering all security assessments conducted, including independent reviews, all of which indicated there was no threat to Bangladesh players, media persons, officials and fans at any of the tournament venues in India," the ICC said in a statement.

"The ICC board noted that it was not feasible to make changes so close to the tournament and that altering the schedule under the circumstances, in the absence of any credible security threat, could set a precedent that would jeopardise the sanctity of future ICC events..."

It leaves Bangladesh with the options of either changing their stance or getting replaced in the 20-team tournament. There was no immediate confirmation of whether Bangladesh would buckle to the ICC's decision. The board meeting was held via video link with BCB president Aminul Islam among those participating.

The row between the neighbouring nations erupted on January 3, when the Indian cricket board (BCCI) ordered the Indian Premier League franchise Kolkata Knight Riders to release Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman.

Bangladesh responded by refusing to tour India and banning broadcasts of the IPL in the country. An ICC delegation arrived in Dhaka last weekend to find a solution but the Bangladesh Cricket Board stuck to its guns.

"Despite these efforts, the BCB maintained its position, repeatedly linking its participation in the tournament to a single, isolated and unrelated development concerning one of its players' involvement in a domestic league," the ICC said alluding to Mustafizur's IPL snub. "This linkage has no bearing on the tournaments security framework or the conditions governing participation in the T20 World Cup."

Youth and Sports Adviser in Dhaka's interim government Asif Nazrul told the state-run BSS news agency late on Tuesday that Bangladesh "cannot be forced to play in India."

Bangladesh captain Litton Das, speaking to reporters after a domestic match on Tuesday, said he had no idea if the team would take part.

"From where I stand, I'm uncertain, everyone is uncertain," Das said, asking back: "Are you sure we will play the World Cup?

"I think at this moment, the whole of Bangladesh is uncertain," he added in comments reported by Dhaka's *Prothom Alo* newspaper.

During the World Cup, Bangladesh will hold its first elections since a mass uprising in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi. Political relations between India and Bangladesh have soured since.

Pakistan will play their World Cup matches in Sri Lanka in keeping with their policy of not touring India over geopolitical tension between the neighbours.—Agencies

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Players of Pakistan and Nepal in action during their SAFF Women's Futsal Championship match at the Nonthaburi Stadium on Wednesday. Pakistan's hopes of taking top spot suffered a blow after they slipped to a 5-1 reverse for their second straight defeat at the tournament. Unbeaten in their first three matches, Pakistan have seven points from five games and lie fifth in the table ahead of their final round-robin match against Bangladesh on Friday. Bangladesh top the standings with 10 points from four matches, one ahead of India and two ahead of third-placed Bhutan. Nepal's big victory saw them overtake Pakistan on goal difference.—Courtesy SAFF

MELBOURNE: Britain's Emma Raducanu hits a return to Anastasia Potapova of Austria during their Australian Open match on Wednesday.—AFP

Alcaraz spearheads big names into Australian Open third round

MELBOURNE: Carlos Alcaraz withstood a barrage of big hitting from a familiar foe in Yannick Hanfmann in the Australian Open second round on Wednesday, with fellow top seed Aryna Sabalenka also enduring some shaky moments before sealing progress.

Alexander Zverev's advance was stalled by rain showers, an injury scare and feisty Frenchman Alexandre Muller in the evening session, but the men's third seed — well beaten in last year's final by Jannik Sinner — prevailed in four sets to safely reach the third round.

His equivalent in the women's draw, Coco Gauff, earlier made short work of Olga Danilovic, while in-form seventh seed Jasmine Paolini and eighth seed Mirra Andreeva also romped through their contests.

Three-time finalist Daniil Medvedev needed four sets to keep his Grand Slam dream on track at a cooler Melbourne Park after days of hot weather.

After a comfortable win in the opening round, Alcaraz was given more of a workout by hard-hitting Germany's world number 102 Hanfmann on a sunbathed Rod Laver Arena but rose to the challenge and moved on 7-6 (7/4), 6-3, 6-2, setting up a showdown with France's Corentin Moutet.

"To be honest, it was tougher than I thought at the beginning," said Alcaraz, who already has six major titles but has never gone past the last eight in Melbourne. "I didn't feel the ball that good. You know, the ball was coming as a bomb, forehand and backhand."

The 22-year-old found himself trailing 3-1 in the first set and after getting back on level terms wasted several chances to break Hanfmann's huge serve again.

The six-time major winner pounced in the tiebreak to wrap up a physically draining opening set in 78 minutes, however, and carried that momentum into the second set.

Hanfmann received medical treatment before the start of the third and Alcaraz showed no mercy, sealing a double break and closing out the contest on serve.

If Alcaraz does win the Australian Open to complete the career Grand Slam of all four majors, he would be the youngest man to do so, surpassing compatriot Rafael Nadal, who was 24 when he achieved that feat.

Sabalenka's issues in the opener on the main showcourt came out of the blue, the Belarusian racing to a 5-0 lead against China's Bai Zhuoxuan before losing three games in a row.

The world number one refocused and proceeded to mow down Bai the rest of the way, running out a 6-3, 6-1 winner to stay on track for her third title at Melbourne Park.

"She didn't start well, but then she had the strength to step in and to change couple of things and, to put me under pressure. That was really impressive," Sabalenka said.

Sabalenka, who is bidding for a third Australian Open title in four years, set up a clash next with Russian-born Anastasia Potapova, now representing Austria, who dispatched 2021 US Open champion Emma Raducanu 7-6 (7/3), 6-2.

American title contender Gauff was at her ruthlessly efficient best as she crushed Danilovic, who ended Venus Williams's tournament in round one.

The two-time major winner took just 78 minutes to race home 6-2, 6-2 on Margaret Court Arena. It set up a showdown next against fellow American Hailey Baptiste, ranked 70, who downed home hope Storm Hunter in straight sets.

"Near perfect," said Gauff, whose best performance in Melbourne was a semi-final in 2024.

Ukrainian 12th seed Elina Svitolina, Turkish prospect Zeynep Sonmez and in-form Canadian teenager Victoria Mboko also won on day four, all sweeping past their opponents in straight sets.

Andreeva, the 18-year-old Russian sensation, underlined her talent with an impressive 6-0, 6-4 victory over Maria Sakkari of Greece, while the evening rain meant Italian Paolini had to swap courts to complete her 6-2, 6-3 demolition of Magdalena Frech.

Zverev had to wait through a half-hour rain delay and concern over a sore left ankle before beating Alexandre Muller 6-3, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4. He was leading the fourth set 2-1 and serving at 15-0 when he had to halt the match and sit in a courtside chair for treatment.

"I took a painkiller and it was fine after that," said the 28-year-old German, who faces Britain's Cameron Norrie in the third round.

That match aside, ticket holders for the evening session were treated to an Australian-heavy lineup, the highlight for locals being sixth seed Alex de Minaur's 6-7 (5/7), 6-2, 6-2, 6-1 win over Hamad Medjedovic.

The Australian number one, who has never been past the quarter-finals at a Grand Slam, struggled early on against the tricky Serbian but turned the match with a break for 4-2 in the second set after four deuces and next faces Frances Tiafoe, who beat Francisco Comesana 6-4, 6-3, 4-6, 6-2.

Medvedev also surrendered the opening set to Quentin Halys but dug deep to register a 6-7 (9/11). 6-3. 6-4. 6-2 victory. "It was a very tough match, happy I managed to fight," said the Russian, who faces Fabian Marozsan of Hungary next.

Spaniard Alejandro Davidovich Fokina, the 14th seed, won the first two sets but then had to struggle to beat big-serving American Reilly Opelka 6-3, 7-6 (7/3), 5-7, 4-6, 6-4.

American Tommy Paul, Argentine duo Francisco Cerundolo and Tomas Etcheverry, 10th seed Alexander Bublik and Russian Andrey Rublev also safely negotiated the second round.

While Russian flags are banned at Melbourne Park as part of measures imposed by Tennis Australia following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, there were plenty of Turkish flags waving in the stands as Sonmez continued her dream run Down Under.

The 23-year-old, who has become a crowd favourite after helping a ball kid who fainted on the opening day, beat Anna Bondar 6-2, 6-4 to reach the third round for the first time.

"I felt like I was at home, basically I was feeling the energy. It was really unreal," Sonmez said of the support she received. "I really, really appreciate it. I felt very good on the court. I felt like we were all playing together."—Agencies

Maxwell and Waugh among franchise owners in European T20 league

LONDON: Australia all-rounder Glenn Maxwell and former captain Steve Waugh are among the franchise owners in a new European Twenty20 league, which will begin in August after two false starts.

Backed by the cricket boards of Ireland, Scotland and the Netherlands, and approved by the governing International Cricket Council, the European T20 Premier League's (ETPL) founders include Bollywood star Abhishek Bachchan.

"Mainland Europe is not known for cricket," Bachchan told Reuters from Sydney, where they unveiled owners of the three teams, including the Amsterdam franchise owned by a group that includes Waugh and Jamie Dwyer, a five-time International Hockey Federation player of the year.

"It's an opportunity to create a huge cricket ecosystem in and around Europe. With ETPL, we hope we can bring the magic of cricket euphoria to mainland Europe."

Maxwell is a co-owner of the Belfast franchise, while former New Zealand internationals Nathan McCullum and Kyle Mills bought the Edinburgh side.

It is expected that deals for the remaining franchises in Dublin, Glasgow and Rotterdam will be completed by the end of February.

The ICC has 33 members in Europe, most for any continent, including full members England and Ireland. Scotland and Netherlands have played World Cups, while Italy will make their T20 World Cup debut next month.

"Italy's World Cup qualification indicates Europe's interest in cricket, and cricket being in the 2028 Olympics is another boost for Europe," Bachchan said. "We hope to turn ETPL into one of the top T20 leagues in the world."

Waugh, 60, hoped the Amsterdam franchise would inspire more kids to take up the game.

"Franchise cricket has the world's best players playing with locals," the two-time World Cup winner told Reuters. "At Amsterdam, the Dutch players will have the opportunity to play alongside players like Mitchell Marsh, the current Australia T20 captain, or Steve Smith, one of the all-time greats of the game. You can't buy that kind of experience."

Waugh, who scored nearly 11,000 Test runs, said the opportunity to invest in the venture "stood out because it is driven by aspiration and long-term thinking".

"In many ways, it marks a return to the game for me, but in a very different role," he said. "This is about helping uphold the standards and spirit of cricket while supporting its growth into Europe, which remains the game's last great frontier."

Maxwell said: "The Irish people love their sport and Cricket Ireland have made huge strides in expanding the game over the last two decades."

Initially conceived as Euro T20 Slam, the league could not take off in 2019 and its planned launch last year was delayed for the second time. It is expected to start in late August.—Agencies

Abhishek blitzes New Zealand in big India win

NEW DELHI: Opener Abhishek Sharma smashed an incendiary 84 to fashion India's 48-run victory against New Zealand in the first Twenty20 International in Nagpur on Wednesday.

Put into bat, India, who will begin their T20 World Cup title defence next month, racked up 238-7 with Abhishek hammering eight sixes in his 35-ball blitz.

Glenn Phillips struck a rapid 78 but New Zealand finished on 190-7 at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium.

Earlier, Abhishek, currently the top-ranked T20 batsman in the world, led India's charge with a blistering knock, looking unfazed by the early exits of opening partner Sanju Samson and number three Ishan Kishan.

India captain Suryakumar Yadav had gone 22 innings without a fifty in T20 Internationals and while he fell short of the mark again, he looked fluent in his 32. Hardik Pandya (25) departed after a cameo before Rinku Singh provided the late assault, plundering 21 runs in the final over from Daryl Mitchell.

Rinku's unbeaten 44 off 20 balls included three sixes. New Zealand slumped to 52-3 in the seventh over in their wobbly start to a steep chase.

Phillips counter-attacked in spectacular style, hitting six sixes in his 40-ball blitz, and Mark Chapman (39) also stepped on the gas but both fell to spin in quick succession as India regained control.

Spinner Axar Patel, who removed Phillips, left the field with a bleeding thumb in the 16th over but India had enough bowling resources to restrict New Zealand well behind their target.

The teams now move to Raipur for the second T20 of the five-match series on Friday.—Reuters

Scoreboard

INDIA:
S. Samson c Ravindra b Jamieson....10
A. Sharma c Jamieson b Sodhi.....84
I. Kishan c Chapman b Duffy.....8
S. Yadav c Robinson b Santner.....32
H. Pandya c Chapman b Duffy.....25
S. Dube c&b Jamieson.....9
R. Singh not out.....44
A. Patel c Mitchell b Clarke.....5
A. Singh not out.....6
EXTRAS (LB-1, W-14).....15
TOTAL (for seven wkts, 20 overs)...238
DID NOT BAT: V. Chakravarthy, Jasprit Bumrah
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-18 (Samson), 2-27 (Kishan), 3-126 (Yadav), 4-149 (Sharma), 5-166 (Dube), 6-185 (Pandya), 7-209 (Patel)
BOWLING: Duffy 4-0-27-2 (3w), Jamieson 4-0-54-2 (3w), Clarke 4-0-40-1, Sodhi 3-0-38-1 (1w), Phillips 1-0-20-0 (1w), Santner 3-0-37-1 (1w), Mitchell 1-0-21-0 (1w)
NEW ZEALAND:
D. Conway c Samson b A. Singh 0
T. Robinson c Dube b Varun.....21
R. Ravindra c Sharma b Pandya.....1
G. Phillips c Dube b Patel.....78
M. Chapman c Sharma b Varun.....39
D. Mitchell c (sub) b Dube.....28
M. Santner not out.....20
K. Clarke c R. Singh b Dube.....0
K. Jamieson not out.....1
EXTRAS (W-2).....2
TOTAL (for seven wkts, 20 overs)...190
DID NOT BAT: I. Sodhi, J. Duffy
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-0 (Conway), 2-1 (Ravindra), 3-52 (Robinson), 4-131 (Phillips), 5-143 (Chapman), 6-189 (Mitchell), 7-189 (Clarke)
BOWLING: A. Singh 4-0-31-1, Pandya 2-0-20-1 (1w), Bumrah 3-0-29-0, Patel 3.3-0-42-1 (1w), Varun 4-0-37-2, Dube 3-0-28-2, Sharma 0.3-0-3-0
RESULT: India won by 48 runs.
PLAYER-OF-THE-MATCH: Abhishek Sharma

INDIAN opener Abhishek Sharma plays a shot during the first T20 against New Zealand at the Vidarbha Cricket Association Stadium on Wednesday.—AFP

Brook apologises, admits nightclub fracas 'not the right thing to do'

COLOMBO: England white-ball captain Harry Brook on Wednesday admitted it was "not the right thing to do" to get into an altercation with a nightclub bouncer in New Zealand, but insisted "I've learnt from my mistakes".

The 26-year-old was fined 30,000 ($40,000) by the England and Wales Cricket Board after the incident in Wellington the night before a one-day international.

England lost the match the next day with Brook scoring just six.

"I've learnt from my mistakes," Brook told reporters in Colombo where England face Sri Lanka in a three-match ODI series beginning on Thursday. "I've reflected a lot and I know it wasn't the right thing to do," he said, speaking publicly for the first time about the incident on the tour that preceded the Ashes series, which England lost 4-1.

"I want to apologise to my teammates, the fans and the ECB for putting them in a tricky situation," said Brook, who will lead England in next month's T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka. "It will never happen again. I'm extremely sorry."

Controversy dogged England's Ashes series, with allegations of poor preparations, muddled team selection and a "drinking culture" in the England camp. England players were photographed spending hours in bars during a mid-series beach resort break, with a video of an apparently drunk Ben Duckett circulating on social media.

The three-match ODI series in Sri Lanka will be followed by three Twenty20 internationals, England's final warm-ups before the T20 World Cup begins on February 7.

SRI Lankan captain Charith Asalanka (L) and his England counterpart Harry Brook pose with the ODI series trophy at the R. Premadasa International Stadium on Wednesday.—AFP

Brook said the series would be a timely litmus test for his side, who have been searching for rhythm and results.

"It's important to get used to the conditions, the climate and the heat," Brook said. "We are looking forward to a competitive series."

England's white-ball fortunes have nosedived since their forgettable 50-over World Cup campaign in India in 2023 where, as defending champions, they failed to make the semi-finals.

Since then, they have lost six of their last seven bilateral series and endured a Champions Trophy to forget, bowing out after losing all three group games.

"We would like to be a little more consistent, absorb pressure and stay in the game for longer periods," Brook said. "Yes, we've lost a few series, but I feel we're heading in the right direction".

Sri Lanka are wrestling with selection issues ahead of co-hosting the World Cup. Charith Asalanka was removed as T20 captain late last year but continues to lead the 50-over side.

Injury-prone strike bowler Dushmantha Chameera has been rested for this series, while there remains uncertainty over the availability of leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga.

"I would have liked to have both in the team," Asalanka said. "But we have to look at the bigger picture, which is the World Cup. We haven't made a final call on Hasaranga yet."

Sri Lanka squad: Charith Asalanka (captain), Pathum Nissanka, Kamil Mishara, Kusal Mendis, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Pavan Rathnayake, Dhananjaya de Silva, Janith Liyanage, Kamindu Mendis, Dunith Wellalage, Wanindu Hasaranga, Jeffrey Vandersay, Maheesh Theekshana, Milan Rathnayake, Asitha Fernando, Pramod Madushan and Eshan Malinga.—AFP